

Operating theatre assistants in Leeds take two-week strike over pay

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Operating Theatre Assistants (OTAs) at three major hospitals in Leeds, England belonging to the Leeds Teaching Hospitals Trust began a two-week strike June 22.

The hospitals impacted are Leeds General Infirmary, St James's University Hospital and Chapel Allerton Hospital. The members of the Unison union are fighting to increase poverty-level pay of less than £13 an hour. The dispute began last year, including periods of limited industrial action.

The OTAs are currently paid on Band 2, the lowest pay grade within Agenda for Change pay scales covering most of the National Health Service's (NHS) 1.4 million strong workforce. The strikers are demanding an upgrade to Band 3, which would cost employers just over £1 an hour extra. They would still only be earning, in real terms, what they did 20 years ago but performing much more skilled roles. The current national living minimum wage figure is £12.71 and NHS workers on band 2 are paid £12.92 an hour.

OTAs are also demanding the pay rise is backdated.

At the LGI picket line this week. Karen, a Recovery Unit Assistant, told our reporters, "We're all band 2 workers, whether you work in theatre as a peri-operative or you work in recovery. We are wanting band 3. They've trained us to do the job. They've actually acknowledged that it's a band 3 role, it's what we've been doing for years and years.

"It's not about money, it's actually paying for recognition for the job we do. It's not going to make a massive impact, a pound an hour. Just pay us for what we actually do. You trained us up, you signed us off, pay for it.

"It's about saving money, but they're alright giving it out at the top. It's always the top gaining by it, but us at the bottom are gaining nothing. We're not valued for

the work we do, we're not valued for the time we've given to the organisation."

A petition in support of the striking workers, calling for them to be paid fairly, has received over 2,500 signatures.

The NHS careers guide describes the role of theatre support staff as "the glue keeping the surgical team together". Their duties include moving patients on trolleys, preparing patients for anaesthetics, setting out equipment and instruments for surgery, making sure theatres are stocked with necessary items, and cleaning and tidying theatres after surgery.

Over the last 10 years there has been an ongoing shortage of senior clinical personnel, which, together with the increasing sophistication of surgical technology, means OTAs have been expected to assume higher levels of responsibility with no increase in pay. Previously they would have been responsible for more basic logistical tasks such as moving patients and cleaning theatres. Now they are expected to calibrate sophisticated machinery, handle delicate surgical instruments, monitor patients' risks of infection and handle clinical samples.

The OTAs in the Leeds NHS Trust voted unanimously at the end of last year to strike. Unison limited the action to a 48-hour stoppage in December and a five-day stoppage in February of this year.

The current 14-day stoppage went ahead after last-minute talks between Unison representatives and senior hospital administrators broke down. The union leadership did all they could to prevent action. Prior to the February strike Unison Yorkshire and Humberside area organiser Imogen Woods said: "Managers can easily prevent this latest strike from happening by getting back round the table."

The fight by Leeds NHS Trust hospital theatre

assistants is being led by the union under its Pay Fair for Patient Care campaign, launched in early 2022. Current band 3 hourly rates are £13.17 an hour, rising to £14.05 after two years of service. This would still leave upgraded workers on a low rate of pay, amid a worsening cost of a living crisis. The lower £13.17 an hour rate is below the voluntary Real Living Wage figure of £13.45.

Unison has called no national strike over the issue of low pay, only a few isolated and disparate disputes.

A near year-long strike—the longest-running in the history of the NHS—by around 35 phlebotomists employed at Gloucestershire Royal and Cheltenham General hospitals, ended in March. The workers' demands were to be paid at the band 3 level rather than band 2. Unison ended the dispute after the trust agreed the workers' pay and roles would be reviewed by an independent job evaluation panel.

Unison boasts that, "Since 2021, over 100 NHS trusts and health boards in England and Wales have agreed deals on regrading and back pay worth £250m for over 65,000 healthcare support workers." However, despite a campaign launched over four years ago by the union low pay remains endemic within the NHS.

This year Unison published results on levels of pay satisfaction based on data from annual surveys of NHS staff covering the three years to 2025. It showed, "Health care assistants and ambulance staff had the lowest satisfaction levels of all groups in the 2025 data with only 21 percent and 25 percent satisfied with their pay".

Unison head of health, Helga Pile, said of the report, "The [Labour] Government's failure to invest in the NHS workforce has left many angry and disillusioned... Soaring levels of costs have eaten into the pay of all health workers and inflation will quickly wipe out the pay award that kicks in today (April 1)."

In June, coinciding with its annual conference, Unison issued findings based on a survey of more than 3,000 health staff. Many were having to rely on credit cards and work extra shifts because NHS salaries "barely cover essential outgoings". Pile noted, "Pay isn't the only factor that motivates health service staff... but years of annual wage rises well below the cost of living, and a staffing crisis are to blame for increasing numbers leaving".

Unison and other unions sold out and ended several

critical health workers disputes—part a national strike wave—in the last two years of the Conservative government, on the promise that an incoming Labour government would save the day. The sellout allowed Labour to assume office facing no industrial action **and able to** continue enforcing low pay.

In 2023, the Royal College of Nursing opened the floodgates by calling off the March 1 nurses' strike to enter "intensive talks," Unison followed suit. On March 5, 2023, , including 25,000 ambulance workers, scheduled for March 8. The Department of Health and Social Care invited the NHS Staff Council of 12 unions to begin formal pay discussions on the condition that all industrial action be called off "with immediate effect". Unison complied instantly.

When a pay deal was finally announced on March 16—a 6 percent one-off bonus for 2022-23 and a 5 percent pay award for 2023-24—it left workers substantially worse off in real terms.

In the run-up to the 2024 general election, Unison was reported to have donated around £1.5 million to Labour's coffers. Unison support for Labour continues unchanged under its "left" General Secretary Andrea Egan—elected on a turnout of just 7 percent of its 1.3 million members.

The NHS is being dismantled as part of a broader assault on public services to fund militarism and war. Demanding efficiency savings, the Starmer government has driven up productivity in the NHS, while claiming there is "not enough money" for decent pay.

Massive investment is needed in healthcare, funded by the expropriation of the corporations, banks and slashing the military budget. Such a struggle cannot be left in the hands of union bureaucracies. Workers must organise themselves in democratic rank-and-file committees in every hospital, linking together all NHS staff, including theatre assistants, doctors, nurses, healthcare assistants, porters, cleaners, laboratory workers and administrative staff.



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